

HELPING ALL WE CAN...ONE AT A TIME.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Deanna Wallace
AAO Executive Director

Jodie Hampshire & Rob Harris, parents to three lovely children who used to be in AAO's care, visited the Center for a reunion in April. Jodie's letter about the trip is so profoundly beautiful, I will let her words be my note for this month. **A special thank you to Jodie for putting the spirit of All As One Children's Center into writing (and bringing a tear to my eye):**

In April, my family travelled to Sierra Leone, birth country of three of our children, after over a decade. An important part of our visit was seeing our friends at All As One, and reacquainting our kids with their friends and former carers.

As we drove into the centre, familiar faces rushed out to meet us. Preschoolers had become strapping teenagers, but we recognised many faces from years ago. **It was emotional to see the adults who had cared for our children, and you could see the pride in their eyes as they saw our children.** I spent a lot of time that day saying thank you. I don't think I will ever be able to say it enough.



The kids showed us around their home, the kitchen area, the schools. I was reminded of the focus of All As One on education. The children in the centre's care are schooled on site, and then sent to a local high school. The school rooms on site are filled with even more children — kids from local families who otherwise would not be able to afford the "free" schooling in Sierra Leone.

We spent time over a couple of days chatting to the kids about pop music, movies (everyone loved Moana) and made friendship bracelets, did each other's hair and watched dance-offs. When it wasn't too hot, the kids kicked a football around the courtyard.

➤ They openly shared their dreams — the kids want to be teachers, doctors, nurses, artists. Less than a handful of kids still there are now in their late teens and hoping to attend University. **Their dreams were far less abstract, and their understanding of the barriers were concrete.**

These young people have lived through their childhoods without their biological families. At their age and in the current environment, I understand a permanent family is unlikely for them. Most of the staff at All As One are the same faces we saw ten years ago. They love and care for these children as "aunts" and "uncles". In fact, for my daughter, eating their food transported her right back to her childhood. **They are the memory-makers for these kids.**

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Ahead of our trip, I thought a lot about my kids and how it would be for them to return. As I looked at my son and daughter sitting next to their old playmates, the stark contrast between their realities sat heavy in my stomach. My children will be able to study whatever they want, at little expense, in their home country of Australia. They have a safety net of us as family, of extended family, of a welfare system — they cannot really fall through the cracks. **As I looked at their friends beside them, I was reminded that you and I are their safety net.** I know that it is a struggle each and every month for the AAO team to financially provide this safety net.

Together, it's on us to help provide what I can wholeheartedly confirm is a loving home. They are a family and they care for each other as a family — they'll offer the hungrier kid the rest of their lunch, they freely shared the sweets we provided, they waited patiently for their turn to get their friendship bracelet set up.

Together, it's on us to educate these kids. One day, we hope they can have jobs and support themselves and have a more normal family life.



I cannot return to my normal life, and forget the dreams of these kids. **As privileged residents of extremely privileged countries, the responsibility to help others sits squarely on our shoulders.** My family have decided to give a set percentage of our income, rather than seeing what's left at the end of the financial year, or around Christmas. This money will have little impact on our life. But if it can send a few children to University, dozens more to school? I can't think of a better way to make an impact on their lives.

We will return soon to Sierra Leone, and I cannot wait to hear stories of university life and more dreams of what might be possible.

Collectively, we can pull together to be their safety net. Collectively we can help them achieve some of their dreams. Will you think about what impact you can have today?

Jodie Hampshire

Thanks to those who gave over \$500 in March 2018:

Al & Polly Roberts - Chris Briers - Jody Bolling - Polly Archer & David Walker - Robert & Joanne Lovelace - Yvonne Katter

And thank you to our regular monthly supporters, who make our work possible!